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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) regrets that visas have not been issued by the Indian government for a USCIRF visit to discuss religious freedom conditions with officials, religious leaders, civil society activists and others in the world's largest democracy.

As a U.S. government body, visits by the Commission must have official status. USCIRF obtained U.S. State Department support, made travel arrangements, and requested meetings with a variety of officials. Despite this, the Indian government did not issue the USCIRF delegation visas. The Commissioners were to have left the United States on June 12.

The aim of the long-requested trip was to discuss religious freedom conditions in India, home to a multitude of religious communities that have historically co-existed. India has experienced an increase in communal violence against religious communities in recent years and the USCIRF Commissioners sought to discuss the Indian government's responses to this, and its development of preventive strategies at the local and national levels. According to information before USCIRF, the Indian justice system has prosecuted only a handful of persons responsible for communal violence and related abuses since the mid 1980s.

In 2002, USCIRF recommended India be designated a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) following events in Gujarat that resulted in an estimated 2,000 deaths. Although India was removed from the CPC list in 2005, USCIRF has continued to monitor, report, and comment publicly on events in the country, including last year's violence in Orissa, attacks in Mumbai, and other events.

The Indian government did not offer alternative dates for a visit. USCIRF first tried to obtain visas for India in 2001. This would have been the Commission's first visit to India.

"We are particularly disappointed by the new Indian government's refusal to facilitate an official U.S. delegation to discuss religious freedom issues and government measures to counter communal violence, which has a religious component," said Commission chair Felice D. Gaer. "Our Commission has visited China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and over 20 other countries. India, a close ally of the United States, has been unique among democracies in delaying and denying USCIRF's ability to visit. USCIRF has been requesting visits since 2001."

USCIRF issues its annual report on religious freedom each May and this year's India section was delayed because of the planned USCIRF trip. "We wanted to hear from all sectors of Indian society, and allow these diverse perspectives to shape our report," said Gaer. In the absence of in-country travel, USCIRF will release a report on India later this summer.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3257.